**Designing a Student-Specific Reinforcement System**

**Positive Reinforcers**

Identifying and using items and activities that increase appropriate behaviors is a crucial component in reducing a student’s challenging behaviors. The following items/activities have been identified as preferred by the student, according to her teacher and mother. It is recommended that these items be obtained and made available for use in the student’s classroom and other school settings:

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| Reinforcers | |
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Note: A reinforcer, by definition, *increases* behavior. If appropriate behaviors do not increase, the items are not serving as reinforcers. It is possible that their lack of effectiveness is due to how they are utilized (reinforcement system, how frequently reinforcers are provided, how quickly they are provided after appropriate behavior, whether they are allowed outside of a teaching/training situation.

**Reinforcement System**

There are several recommended components to any reinforcement system being implemented at school:

First, determine what the order of preference is for the items/activities that are available. This can be done in one of 2 ways:

* 1. Forced-Choice: Put out & offer 2 items or pictures of items at a time, & note which the student chooses. Continue this until all items have been paired with one another. This could also involve the student signing the item’s name to you, not necessarily selecting it. This should give you an idea of relative preference. For items that are too large or not portable (computer, video game system, etc), use photos of those items instead.
  2. Multiple-Stimulus: Put out all the possible options at once on a table in front of the student. As the student selects one, remove it from the table and ask the student to choose again. This will give you an order of preference.

Determine a Schedule of Reinforcement: This is an important component of any reinforcement system, and there are two possible schedules:

1. Frequency: The number of responses (on average) that the student will be reinforced after completing. For example, a Variable-Ratio (VR) schedule of 10 would mean that the student is reinforced after an average of 10 responses. Sometimes it would be after 7 or 8, sometimes 11 or 12. Once you have consistent responding at this level, increase the schedule gradually. If the student does not respond to this schedule, lower the VR.
2. Duration: The length of time (on average) the student will be required to behave appropriately (includes compliance) before being reinforced. For example, a Variable-Interval (VI) schedule of 10 would mean that the 1st appropriate response Bregayle made after an average of ten minutes would be reinforced. Sometimes it will be after 8 or 9 minutes, sometimes 11 or 12. Once you have consistent responding at this level, increase the schedule gradually. If the student does not respond to this schedule, lower the VI.

\*\*Everyone working directly with the student should have the schedule of reinforcement in mind at all times. If different people use different schedules, or the same are inconsistent with the schedule, it will decrease the effectiveness of the reinforcers because they will be provided too often (will lose its effectiveness) or not often enough (too many responses required or too much time passing will lead to problem behaviors, because the value of the problem behavior will be stronger than the reinforcer).

**Rules for Delivering Reinforcers**

To increase or maintain the effectiveness of reinforcers, consider these guidelines:

* Determine & utilize a specific schedule of reinforcement with all implementers.
* Vary the reinforcers being provided: If the student has too much exposure to one particular reinforcer, it will lose its value over time. By mixing & varying the student’s options, it keeps individual reinforcers strong. Do not always have the same items/activities available.
* No freebies: Avoid allowing the student access to these reinforcing items outside of training situations. Access that isn’t related to a particular behavior will lessen the effectiveness of the item/activity when it is used in training/teaching situations.
* Sufficient quality & quantity: For quality, make sure the student actually wants the particular item you are offering. For example, even if the student enjoys playing video games, if you offer a game that is disliked, the game system will not be effective. For quantity, make sure the student gets a sufficient amount or time with the reinforcer. One minute of computer time after a long work session will not be effective. But be careful not to provide too much or allow access that is too long to these items. Fifteen minutes on the computer or a whole snack are examples of this. It is much better to do shorter training sessions, followed by small amounts of the reinforcer. (Three 10-minute work sessions with small breaks/reinforcer, versus one 30-minute work session followed by a lengthy break)
* Do not provide reinforcers once problem behavior has begun. Even if you think it will stop the behavior temporarily, giving the student access to the reinforcer will only increase the frequency of the problem behavior because it was followed by a favorable outcome (student received preferred item as a result of problem behavior). Instead, provide the reinforcer once appropriate behavior resumes.

**Types of Reinforcement Systems**:

There are 2 possible approaches to utilizing reinforcers with students:

1. Give the items/activities directly: This method is simple to implement, and only requires you to have a schedule of reinforcement in mind. Provide the item/activity once the student has met the requirements of the schedule. Activities should last no more than 10 minutes, preferably less. It is much better to do three 5-minute breaks in-between handwriting, rather than a 15-minute break at the end of a 15-minute handwriting assignment.
2. Use a token or point system: The benefit to a system like this is that you can increase the duration of work and/or the number of responses before the actual reinforcer is given. With this system, you give points/tokens on a schedule of reinforcement, which the student then “cashes in” for items/activities. Token systems can take several forms: a) actual tokens, such as pennies or plastic poker chips, which can be put in a jar, attached to a clipboard with velcro, put in a wallet, etc.; b) tallies, stamps, or stickers on a point sheet, such as a note card.

Rules for designing a token system:

1. Determine the type of token to be used (points, actual tokens)
2. Determine how often tokens will be given (schedule of reinforcement), and where they will be stored.
3. Determine how long it should take for the student to earn all the tokens.
4. Have a variety of items and activities to choose from, preferably on a reinforcer “menu” containing laminated photos (Velcro on back).
5. Once the system is in place, consider using *response cost*, which involves the removal of some of the tokens/points for specific problem behaviors. The loss of the tokens signals to the student that the behavior is inappropriate. Only for extreme behaviors should you consider removing all tokens. Given the limited number of items/activities that may serve as reinforcers, it is not recommended that you remove any activities as options following problem behavior. Instead, require the student to earn the tokens back to access the item/activity again. This procedure will require approval, due to it being classified as punishment.